



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE MIRACLE MAN OF NEW ORLEANS

By JOHN M. FLETCHER, Tulane University of Louisiana

During the spring months of the year 1920 there came to New Orleans an old man presenting the typical mien and make-up of a latter day prophet, who has made this city a rival of Quebec as a center for miraculous healing. It is reported that in 1903 the pilgrimages to the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré, near Quebec, including persons who had been healed and those who were seeking to be healed, amounted to 168,000. No account has been kept of those who have visited the New Orleans Miracle Man, but if one were to include those who came merely to see what was being done it is very likely that the number would exceed the total of those who visited the famous Quebec shrine in 1903. It is interesting to note that the New Orleans Miracle Man is also of Canada, having been born there in 1847. In the veins of many whom he attempted to heal runs the blood of the exiled Acadians, who make up a considerable percentage of the population in certain regions of Louisiana. The 'Cajans', as they are known locally, include a large percentage of illiteracy and also a large percentage of those who cannot speak English. It would not be true to say, however, that only among the 'Cajans' was the faith in miraculous cures able to secure a foothold. There have been many persons of all nationalities, and representing all sections of the country and all strata of society, who have become converted to the belief in the old man's claims. A reporter on one of the city papers, who has recently come from New York, and who says his father was a physician, took the writer to task for asserting that there had been no authenticated case of the cure of an organic disease by the healer. Yet on the whole, as in all such cases, the great background on which the entire movement rests is one of ignorance and superstition. One does not have to do more than to visit one of the open-air demonstrations, and watch the types of faces uplifted in hope and the hands outstretched in pathetic appeal, to realize that this is true.

It has seemed to the writer that this case holds something that is of interest to psychology and that it should therefore be noticed and recorded. The social aspects of the case are now being investigated. Local psychiatrists are also seeking the

opportunity to make a study of it. The following account is given with a view to presenting merely the facts and general impressions of the event itself. This account contains the substance of a paper read before the Southern Society of Psychology and Philosophy at its annual meeting at Tulane University in April, 1920.

As to the Miracle Man himself it must be said that very little is known and very little can be found out. His real name is John Cudney, though on the occasion of his christening an older sister, who is reported by him to have had "foresight," said he was destined to be a prophet and wished him to be called Isaiah. In the family he was called Brother Isaiah, and it is by this name that he still prefers to be known. The circumstance of his christening in this fashion and the force of the suggestion in his name seem to have had much to do with determining his career.

In his early life he made, so far as has been ascertained, no attempts to effect cures, or to exercise any other unusual gifts.

From Canada he came to America some time in his youth. As a young man, while walking alone in the woods of Nebraska, he claims to have heard a divine voice telling him that he was called upon to heal people of diseases. This seems to have meant to him that he should desert his family. He relates that he agonized with God over this matter far into the night, but arrived at no solution. The following morning his wife, who seems also to have had the same revelation about him, announced that she and their sons would have to give him up so that he could devote the rest of his life to the work to which he had been called. Since that time he has traveled in many parts of the world healing by prayer and, like the apostles of Christ, earning his living meanwhile. He has apparently operated in many other American cities, although not so conspicuously as in New Orleans. In certain instances he seems to have been "invited" to leave by the city authorities.

In spite of his popular title of the "Miracle Man," he does not lay claim to performing miracles. He says that the power to heal diseases comes to him periodically, but that all he does is done through the goodness of God. He disclaims being a Christian Scientist, though like the members of that communion he believes that God does not will disease. The truth of the matter seems to be that he is probably incapable of working out any consistent notion of what he proposes to do. He uses an oil of wintergreen to rub those whom he treats, but he says that this has no curative properties, and is merely to decrease friction. He makes use of magic by blessing handkerchiefs and sending them to patients who are not able to reach him. In watching his healing one day the writer heard him speak of epilepsy as demonic possession. He said, "I have had a great

deal of experience with them cases. And I tell you when them epileptic fits come out they makes a lot of noise." He presents all the appearances of being a devout, simple-minded religious fanatic. He could easily have made a Peter the Hermit or a St. Simeon Stylites. Those who know him privately and intimately speak well of his character and absolve him from conscious fakery. Whether he can survive the notoriety thrust upon him remains to be seen. He has been repeatedly offered money, but either from fear of the law or from principle he seems to have refused it, though he does accept gifts. There are rumors that he has received money, though these are difficult to prove. Temptations of a sex character are also assailing him. Certain of his female 'cures' do not hesitate to kiss him and fondle him in public. This, coupled with the fact that he preaches that a wife should leave a husband if God calls her, makes it entirely possible that the matter may at any time have a sudden and unsavory ending.

The story of how he came to attract such extraordinary attention not only illustrates the human craving for the supernatural but at the same time indicates the responsibility of the public press, a responsibility which is not always fully appreciated. For several days the papers of New Orleans debated among themselves whether they should give publicity to what was being done. They presently decided in the affirmative; and about the first warning that the public had was the burst into print of accounts of wonderful cures effected by a strange old man in a little house-boat on the mud banks of the levee at the foot of Calhoun Street. These accounts produced a marked impression on the entire city. Everywhere on the streets and in the homes people were talking about Brother Isaiah. Through the press dispatches reports went to other cities. Moving-picture concerns seized upon the new sensation and scattered the distorted rumors still further. Even the billboards of Broadway, New York, gave space to this thriller.

It seems that the healer had been at work for some time prior to his burst into notoriety. He had in fact been to New Orleans once or twice before and had made acquaintances along the river-front. His reputation began to grow in the earlier months of this year to such an extent that it became necessary to call extra police-help in order to disentangle the automobiles that came to his home. There was even at this stage a curious mixture of the poor and the rich among his patrons. Some hobbled on foot, others came in elegant limousines. The people who first went to see him were those interested in being healed or in having some member of the family treated. After the front-page account in the newspaper came out, the health-seekers were joined by a throng of the curious. Extra street-cars were

put on the lines leading to that portion of the river front. Great masses of pedestrians and people in automobiles crowded the levee daily. The number of persons seeking treatment assumed alarming proportions. The sick began to arrive on all trains, without taking the precaution to make inquiry about accommodations. The charitable organizations, the hospitals, the Red Cross, and the city officials found themselves with a problem on their hands. Letters, telegrams and long-distance telephone calls poured into the offices of the newspapers; they had apparently got more than they bargained for. Conditions of great distress began to spring up about the old man's place of operation. Invalids who perhaps had not left their rooms or beds for months came and stood for hours in the cold March wind and sometimes in the rain awaiting their turn. Patients who were almost delirious with fever would stand with their head on the shoulder of a relative in the long line of suffering. An occasional groan of pain would elicit the comforting statement that their turn would come soon. No toilet accommodations had been provided, much less any shelter or food. It became a problem of serious concern to the State Board of Health. It became necessary to protect the health of the community, and at the same time it seemed wise to avoid any appearance of persecution of those who were holding with mad fanaticism to the faith of the old healer. One can imagine how unsanitary the whole procedure was when told that he was rubbing and manipulating his patients one after the other all day and most of the night without even washing his hands. It was reported that leprosy had appeared among his patients. On account of these dangers it became necessary to remove the tents that had been set up by the Red Cross on the levee for the protection of those who had left their homes to come for the treatment.

In the height of the excitement of the early days of his recent popularity one could hear on all hands wonderful stories about what the 'miracle man' could do and had done. Some said he was Christ appearing on earth again. The story went around that he had once stopped a shower of rain by holding up his hand. The credulity and the will to believe upon the part of the well, and the desperate hope of the sick, made out of the situation a veritable rumor factory. An appreciation of the setting of this case seems to be necessary in order to get an idea of the atmosphere out of which these rumors grew. Miss Doris Kent, a former student of the writer and a graduate of Newcomb College, Tulane University, was assigned by the Times-Picayune of this city to write the matter up. She remained on the assignment until threatened with violence by one of the self-appointed managers, who was suspected of carrying on a petty graft-scheme by which he could for a consideration secure

prompt attention from the healer. Miss Kent thus describes the situation as she saw it March 13th:

"Steadily swelling crowds, excitement rising to white heat throughout the city and community, dozens of new 'cures' and a few bits of conflicting testimony were results of another day and night of 'faith healing' on the levee off Audubon Park, where John Cudney, or 'Brother Isaiah,' has worked steadily for three days and three nights, praying for the healing of the sick and the defective.

"His great frame sagging slightly with weariness, his face almost as white as his long hair and his snowy beard, the old riverman had hardly paused for rest or food since the first rush upon his little houseboat began Wednesday afternoon. As he prays over some twisted form on a little rudely-erected platform in the mud, hemmed in so closely by the crowd that scarcely a breath of air reaches him, he pauses for a moment to swallow a few mouthfuls of orange or pineapple juice, passed to him over the heads of the crowd. Back in the tiny houseboat, that was almost sunk Thursday, when the mob pressed aboard, Mrs. Coldberg, the 77 year old sister of the 'healer', prepared the only nourishment he found time to take."

The following is given as a picture of what the situation looked like March 14:

"Paeans of joy from men, women and children who professed to be cured in an instant by 'Brother Isaiah's' powers continued to go up from many sources Friday.

"Watch fires were built all along the levee and down on the river beach late Saturday night by those who were determined to obtain close-up positions when 'Brother Isaiah' resumed his practice, which it was said he would do early Sunday morning. The bivouac of the 'faithful' presented a weird appearance, and hundreds of sight-seers journeyed in automobiles to look on the strange scene. Carnival and the Day of Judgment combined best expresses the atmosphere on the Audubon Park levee Saturday, when 5000 persons at one time gathered to witness the 'faith healing' of John Cudney, the 'Brother Isaiah' who has thrown the city into a turmoil with his alleged 'cures'.

"By nightfall (of March 16) a village of little white tents had sprung up like a growth of mushrooms along the embankment. The American Red Cross has contributed ten tents and one hundred cots, and will provide more if necessary to house the unfortunates whose hope drives them to remaining at their posts day and night. . . . A large platform will be built for him later, since the 'healer' has refused all offers of a hall, declaring that he must do his work in the open air on the spot where he first began.

"Surroundings rapidly are becoming dangerously insanitary upon the levee. Since Sunday the spot has taken on the aspect of a lot just vacated by a circus. The ground is trampled bare for a long distance, and every vestige of grass has been wiped out by the thousands of feet. The waiting line stands at the foot of the levee toward the river, and in the hollow has collected a drift of tattered papers, rotting fruit, fragments of food, broken bottles, torn boxes,—all at the feet of the wretched ones who have stood for more than twenty-four hours packed between the ropes about the runway. In the sultry, humid atmosphere of Monday afternoon the place was repellent to every sense, yet the dreary line still stood with abject patience, scarcely speaking among themselves or noticing the reduced ranks of the sightseers who stood on the higher ground.

"Petty commerce thrives all around the outskirts of the crowd about the 'miracle man'. The peanut, popcorn, soft drink, and fruit wagons are

there and the latest addition to that thoroughfare is an array of photographs of Brother Isaiah at work. They hung artistically upon the red brick wall of the Marine Hospital."

With reference to the reputed cures it seems quite difficult in this instance to find even the kernel of truth which must as a rule constitute the basis of fact upon which such excited rumors take their rise. It is needless to say that no organic diseases have been successfully treated by this healer. Out of the vast numbers who have been to him for treatment there must have been a percentage of cases of a functional character, which were amenable to just the kind of treatment he offered. But when one starts out to locate these cases they are difficult to find. One can find all sorts of stories about what was said to have been done, but substantiated instances are not so easy to find. And the interesting aspect of the case is that the minds of the crowds did not seem to need substantiation. They were quite ready to believe the miraculous reports without it. If one accepted the verdict of the crowds that surrounded the old man in the earlier days of his work here one would have to believe that tuberculosis, cancer, paralysis, Bright's disease, blindness, deafness, dumbness, and practically all other forms of human affliction yielded with equal readiness to his methods.

The case that gave the initial impulse to the wild rumors of the earlier days was that of a little girl who was born blind and who was reported to have had her eye-sight restored. The rumor of this cure flew like wild-fire over the city. This was followed by other reported cures in such rapid succession that it has never been possible to check up the case to see what the facts were. It sounds very similar to many other cases that were investigated and found to have no basis of fact whatever in them. There is at least one case in which subsequent investigation confirmed the rumor that a cure had been effected. This was the case of a man who had what was called rheumatic paralysis, and who had been unable to dress himself. He seems to have been cured and to have remained cured up to date.

The cases that were reported as cures were very numerous. A sample of this kind of cure, and at the same time a sample of the typical behavior of the crowd-mind, are afforded in the case of Benny Wilson. It seems that this young man had been a cripple since he was five years of age. He made his way to 'Brother Isaiah' on March 13th, and after much difficulty secured treatment. The crowd was much interested in Benny's case, and in general quite excited. After the treatment a dense crowd flocked around him in intense curiosity. They shouted, "He is walking!;" others said, "No, he is running!" Women screamed, while men swore terrible oaths to give vent to their feelings. The crowd was so thick about him that it was

quite impossible for anyone to see what was going on, but from those who were near him it was subsequently found out that he had neither been running nor walking, but that he had been carried forward bodily by persons who had caught him under the arms. It was stated that it was doubtful whether his feet touched the ground at all during this exciting journey. Before he reached his home the rumor came back that he was in the same condition as before the treatment. A man is reported to have gone up for treatment of cross-eyes. The crowd, having forgotten what he was being treated for, and having taken him for a paralytic, shouted "another miracle" when he walked away. Another case of this character is that of an imbecile girl who was dumb. She was brought by her mother to be treated. While waiting on the outskirts of the crowd she began to mutter, doubtless in her usual fashion. The crowd took her to be a 'cure' and began to gather around her to hear her verbigerations. She naturally grew excited and talked the more vehemently. The mother strove in vain to tell the crowd that the child had not even seen the miracle man.

The extent to which the excitement and bewilderment penetrated the city is illustrated by the story of the man who had some time ago lost one eye. Without the knowledge of his wife he had a glass eye inserted. When he went home at night his wife asked in surprise what had happened to him. He replied that he had been treated by Brother Isaiah. Before he could control the situation his whole family fell on his neck and rejoiced.

The Chief of Police of New Orleans sent a test case about the middle of March in the person of Mr. John Mayes, formerly conductor on the Illinois Central Railroad. Mr. Mayes had suffered a stroke of paralysis about a year previously, which resulted in hemiplegia of his right side. His speech has also been interfered with, so that he is able to say only two words, 'no' which he repeats over and over, and 'Lee' the name by which he now designates his wife. For three days he had waited his turn for treatment. Both he and his wife had the utmost faith that the treatment would be successful. When his turn finally came he was carried onto the pier by the negro body-servant who is his constant attendant, and was placed in a chair in the presence of the healer. The account of the treatment of this case says:

"The afflicted man sat with his eyes glued to the face of the 'healer' while hope fairly blazed from them. Back of him his wife stood, with hands clenched tightly together, whispering encouragement. The 'miracle man', gaunt and weary, in his long blue garment, like the apron of a surgeon, bent over him with faith as fervent as the hope of the patient. Kneeling beside the chair, the big negro, his hands trembling with excitement, gently removed the overcoat and coat of the paralytic and held the little bottle of oil while the 'miracle man' rubbed the afflicted shoulder and forehead of the

patient. After several moments of prayer he suddenly looked into the eyes of the patient and cried, "Say your name, say John!" The throat of the paralyzed man contracted and swelled with the effort; his eyes never left the eyes of the 'miracle man', but the only sound that came forth was "No! no! no!" "Yes", cried the healer, "Not no! say yes!" Painfully the man tried again and again, but his eyes filled with tears as he failed again and again. "Say Praise God!" the healer cried again. "Call upon the Lord, my brother!" But the name that forced itself from the agonized lips of the paralyzed man was the name of the wife behind him, who burst into tears at the sound. The old healer in his anxiety to help the man made a figure almost as tragic as the other two. He tried again and again, with prayer, encouragement and friendly urgings, but at last the paralytic was carried away in the strong arms of his servant with the promise of 'later treatment', which perhaps would be effective."

These test cases did not daunt the courage of the healer nor end the expectation of the believers.

The case of Emile Lacoume is of interest. Lacoume is the locally well-known blind newsboy-musician, who is reported to be one of the first introducers of that world-renowned New Orleans product, jazz music. When a newsboy on the streets he is said to have attracted the attention of Olga Nethersole and also of Sarah Bernhardt, each of whom desired to send him away to be educated in the schools for the blind. After being treated by the healer, Lacoume was told to go to his home and keep his eyes closed for 24 hours, then pray and open them. These instructions he carried out with eager care and interest, only to experience the terrible shock of disappointment in the end.

The recent stages of the work of the miracle man have been characterized by increasing doubts concerning his powers, though he still has a nucleus of followers who hang on his lips for every word he utters in his disconnected sermons. The reverence and breathless awe which formerly characterized the attitude of the crowd toward him personally have markedly decreased, so that certain of his Italian patients seem to have threatened to "get him" for discriminating against them.

The moral which is apparent in this case scarcely needs to be pointed out. The lay public cannot easily be disturbed nowadays by the superstitions of the Middle Ages when it comes to organic diseases, such as infections and the like. General knowledge of this class of diseases has spread very rapidly, especially within recent years. The old-time medicine man has gone out of business. But when it comes to the mental side of disease there is still a lack of training upon the part of the average physician, and a susceptibility to the wildest superstitions upon the part even of intelligent laymen. In the realm of mental diseases it is not only possible for dignified cults which are indefensible in the light of modern knowledge to thrive, but we are actually left with primitive medicine men on our hands. John Cudney, alias Brother Isaiah, is one of them.